

# Not “College Ready”

**The Effect of Non-Proficient Students on the CCRI Graduation Rate**

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September 2012

## Genesis of Project

This research project was supported through a grant from the RI Campus Compact, Engaged Scholars, Statewide Presidential Faculty Fellowship Program. “The Rhode Island Campus Compact is a coalition of college and university presidents dedicated to helping campus-based community service initiatives coordinate, organize, and deepen their individual and collective work, and their collaboration with other service organizations, in order that they might make significant, positive impacts on student learning and the quality of life in the state.” Members of the RI Campus Compact include Brown University, Bryant University, Community College of Rhode Island, Johnson and Wales, New England Institute of Technology, Providence College, Rhode Island College, Rhode Island School of Design, Roger Williams University, Salve Regina University, University of Rhode Island, and the United States Naval War College. “Currently four presidents from Rhode Island make up the Executive Board of Governors.”

They are:

President Ray Di Pasquale, Community College of Rhode Island (Chairman)

President Nancy Carriuolo, Rhode Island College

President John Maeda, Rhode Island School of Design (Host Campus)

President Mim Runey, Johnson & Wales University - Providence Campus

The lead researcher on the project was Christopher Ratcliffe who was one of ten inaugural Faculty Fellows chosen for the “2011- 2012” school year. Mr. Ratcliffe is a marketing and management consultant who teaches a variety of business classes at both CCRI and Bryant University. He is also a graduate of CCRI.

Research assistants on the project included Lauren Macbeth and Anthony Paolino, who both graduated from CCRI in 2012. Both are currently pursuing bachelor’s degrees; Lauren at Roger Williams University and Anthony at Providence College.

A heartfelt thanks goes out to the RI Campus Compact for supporting this research, to Bill LeBlanc, Director of the Office of Institutional Research and Planning at CCRI who provided access to CCRI enrollment and testing data, to the Rhode Island Department of Education and RI Kids Count for study data, to Ms. Macbeth and Mr. Paolino for their help in researching and organizing this study, and to the more than 75 CCRI students who participated in the study by conducting both primary and secondary research.

## **Background and Significance**

The Rhode Island Junior College State System was established in 1960 by an act of the RI General Assembly. RI Junior College opened its doors to students in 1964 with an initial enrollment of 325 students. In 1980, the name was changed to the Community College of Rhode Island. (1)

The primary mission of CCRI *“is to offer recent high school graduates and returning adults the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for intellectual, professional and personal growth through an array of academic, career and lifelong learning programs.”* (2)

Today, “the Community College of Rhode Island is the largest public, two-year, degree granting college in New England” (1) with over 17,000 full and part-time students (3).

The CCRI three-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time, degree/ certificate-seeking students is 9.6%, ranking Rhode Island 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation (4). The three-year graduation rate for white students is 10.2%, for African American students, 4.8%, and for Hispanic students, 8% (5).

The CCRI transfer rate, those students who transfer to another institution prior to graduation, is 21.5% for white students, 29.5% for African American students, and 14.8% for Hispanic students (5). The overall transfer rate for CCRI students is 20.8%, ranking CCRI 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation (4). The combined CCRI graduation and transfer rate is 30.3% which ranks CCRI 41<sup>st</sup> in the nation (4).

In 2009, the percentage of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen that were deemed “college ready” as determined through results of the college’s Accuplacer exam (as of CCRI's official enrollment date) , which all new students are required to take, was just 27% (6). Therefore, 73% of these incoming freshmen to CCRI were deemed “developmental” and in need of remediation in at least one subject area. Furthermore, 40% of all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen stop attending CCRI within one year (6). The college refers to these students as “stop-outs”, meaning that they may eventually return to CCRI, with some earning a degree in more than three years.

43% of “college ready” students, those students that require no academic remediation, either graduate or transfer within three years (13.5% graduate and 29.5% transfer), while only 27% of “developmental” students do the same (8% graduate and 19% transfer) (6).

In 2008 and 2009, 12% of *all* credit hours (not just those for full-time students) at the college were for remedial/ developmental classes (7).

Even in light of significant remediation efforts over the years, the CCRI graduation rate has remained virtually unchanged. This suggests that either a greater emphasis needs to be placed on remediation, or that remediation, while pursuing a college curriculum, is futile.

### **Central Problems**

Since 73% of all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking CCRI students require remediation in one or more subject areas, it is plausible to hypothesize that a significant issue exists with the academic preparedness of incoming students. It certainly begs the question: why aren’t students who graduated from Rhode Island high schools prepared for college work? It further begs the question: how is it that these students graduated without being prepared for such work? Also, with significant resources being expended by CCRI in an effort to bring students who are not “college ready” up to grade level, why is it that the overall graduation rate has remained unchanged?

### **Scope of Research**

This research project endeavored to determine the causation surrounding the low graduation rate among full-time students at CCRI and was intended to serve as an academic opportunity for CCRI students in the area of market research. To that end, two CCRI students were selected to work as research assistants on the project (Anthony Paolino and Lauren Macbeth) while also including over 75 CCRI students from three *Principles of Marketing* classes.

The research project analyzed data from the top 20 feeder communities within which approximately 85% of the entire CCRI population resides (3). This portion of the research evaluated such metrics as proficiency in math and reading, and attempted to track “same” student performance in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades based upon standardized NECAP scores (New England Common Assessment Program). NECAP measures students’ academic knowledge in relation to specific grade level expectations. The NECAP results were compared to the graduation rates in the 20 selected communities. Our goal was to determine the degree to which non-proficient students, as defined by the results of the NECAP exam, were being promoted to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, and then ultimately graduating from high school. Because the RI Department of Education does not track this type of promotion (social promotion) *prior* to graduation, nor does it have a policy on this practice, the only benchmark we could use for determining social promotion was proficiency, as determined by statewide NECAP scores.

We chose to analyze NECAP test scores because they were the only metrics available to us on a statewide basis for determining proficiency levels for elementary, middle, and high school students. However, according to Measured Progress, the company that analyzes and reports NECAP scores in Rhode Island and throughout New England, single test results are subject to certain measurement errors. In its paper, titled “Measurement Error, Human Error, and Decisions Based on a Test”, Measured Progress states that “a test score estimates something—a student’s mathematical proficiency, perhaps. It is an estimate because it is based on a small sampling of the universe of items that could have been included on the test. Further, a test score is affected by factors other than the student’s mathematical proficiency, such as: how well or motivated the student feels, whether there were distractions or interruptions during the testing session, and whether the student made good or bad guesses, to name a few. These factors, which can all be sources of measurement error, explain the difference between a student’s calculated score on a particular test and that student’s hypothetical “true” score. That true

score, forever unknown, would reflect the student's real level of proficiency." (31) In essence, the NECAP information is not perfect, nor are the Accuplacer results. However, many believe that they serve as an important indication of student proficiency.

### **Top 20 CCRI "Feeder" Communities**

The research primarily focused on the communities of Providence, Cranston, Warwick, Pawtucket, East Providence, Coventry, North Providence, Woonsocket, West Warwick, Cumberland, Johnston, Lincoln, North Kingstown, Newport, Westerly, Middletown, Narragansett, Burrillville, Central Falls and Bristol. These 20 communities represent 85% of the entire CCRI population, or 14,477 people who were students at CCRI in the fall of 2010 (3).

We evaluated academic performance, by community and in the aggregate, based upon NSRE (New Standards Reference Exam was given to students through 2004, and predated NECAP testing which commenced in 2005) and NECAP test scores in math and reading. Since the most recent data available was from 2011, we tracked 11<sup>th</sup> graders in 2011 ...who were 8<sup>th</sup> graders in 2008... and who were 4<sup>th</sup> graders in 2004, in an effort to reach a predominance of our target "same students". However, we could not extrapolate results based upon *true* "same students", since no *per-student* transience rate is available on a statewide basis.

It is, however, interesting to note that Providence, Pawtucket, West Warwick, Woonsocket, and Central Falls (four of the top ten feeder communities; Central Falls not included) had the largest decline in the number of *public-school*, 11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test taking students (in 2011) who took the test in the same district where they took the NECAP test in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (in 2004)(8, 9) This *Urban Core* of communities also has the highest level of childhood poverty in Rhode Island (10). In an effort to rule out the possibility that students from these communities simply transferred to *non-public* schools

(religious, independent, private schools), we reviewed data from RIDE on *non-public* school attendance for these communities which showed that there was a decline in those numbers as well. (18).

We then sought to determine the percentage of students who had actually completed the NECAP test, in an effort to rule out the possibility that there were high levels of non-test-taking students in these communities. However, the Rhode Island Department of Education mandates that “schools and districts must test at least 95% of their enrolled students in reading and mathematics” (30).

| <b>Community</b> | <b>4<sup>th</sup> grade test takers 2004 (8)</b> | <b>11<sup>th</sup> grade test takers 2011 (9)</b> | <b>% change</b> |
|------------------|--|---|-----------------|
| Providence       | 2272   | 1509  | (34%)           |
| Pawtucket        | 815  | 506   | (38%)           |
| West Warwick     | 324  | 260   | (20%)           |
| Woonsocket       | 540  | 355   | (34%)           |
| Central Falls    | 274  | 220   | (20%)           |

According to the US Census, the estimated Rhode Island population declined by 2.7% from 2004 through 2011 (11). However, statewide, there was a 20.2% decline in the number of 4<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers in 2004 versus 11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers in 2011 (12,978 4<sup>th</sup> grade test takers vs. 10,354 11<sup>th</sup> grade test takers)(8,9). Furthermore, 52% of the statewide numeric decline occurred in the above referenced communities. (Total drop statewide: 12,978 (4<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers in 2004) less 10,354 (11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers in 2011) =2,624 fewer test takers.) The total drop in the number of student test takers in the 5 above referenced communities was 1375. (1,375/2,624=52%). (8,9). Students from these 5 communities, totaling 5494 students who were attending CCRI in the fall of 2010, represent 32.3% of the total CCRI population (3). Furthermore, 31% of all first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen who stop attending CCRI within one year, reside in these five communities (32).

Digging a bit further, we sought to develop a better understanding of some key metrics that contribute to academic success in school. We examined statistics on high school attendance, student mobility, student behavior while in school, the degree to which students’ native language was English, as



well as demographic data concerning education levels achieved by parents, percentage of students living in single family households, and poverty.

### Attendance

During the 2010/ 2011 school year, 25% of all RI high school students missed 18 or more days of school. This problem was much more pronounced in the *Urban Core*. In Woonsocket, 48% of high school students missed 18 or more days of school. In Providence and Central Falls, the percentages were 46% and 44% respectively. West Warwick and Pawtucket had rates of 31% and 29% (19).

### Mobility

Mobility rates in public schools are determined by dividing the total number of students who entered or exited a school system after October 1<sup>st</sup> of a given year, by the cumulative school enrollment. For the 2010/ 2011 school year, the *Urban Core* had the highest student mobility rates. Providence had the highest rate in the state at 25%. Breaking this down further, 11% of students *enrolled* in Providence schools *after* October 1, 2010 and 14% of students *exited* the Providence school system between October 1, 2010 and June of 2011. This means that Providence had approximately 3% fewer students at the *end* of the 2010/ 2011 school year than they had at the beginning of the school year. Mobility rates for Woonsocket, Pawtucket, West Warwick and Central Falls were 23%, 21%, 18% and 14% respectively. According to the 2012 Kids Count Fact Book, “student mobility is associated with lower academic performance, social and psychological difficulties, lower levels of school engagement and behavioral problems. Changing schools disrupts learning, can result in children missing critical conceptual knowledge and skills, and can cause social upheaval for children. Student mobility also can lead to less active parent involvement in their children’s schools.” (19)

### Disciplinary Actions and Suspensions

Disciplinary actions and suspensions are commonplace in the *Urban Core*. For the 2010/ 2011 school year, 54% of all (statewide) school disciplinary actions took place in Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket, yet these districts represent less than 30% of the statewide school population. Providence had the highest rate of out-of-school suspensions (suspensions where students are removed from school for a specified period of time) with 8,046 (out-of-school suspensions), representing 34% of the entire Providence school population. The average out-of-school suspension rate for the 5 communities making up the *Urban Core* was 29%. (19)

### English Language Learners (ELL)

For the 2010-2011 school year, Central Falls, Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket had the highest percentages of students who were English Language Learners, otherwise known as ESL (English as a second language). Topping the list was Central Falls with 24% of the entire student population listed as ELL. 17% of Providence students were ELL, followed by 13% of Pawtucket students and 7% of Woonsocket students. (19)

### Demographic Data

The following data ranks RI in relation to Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. (36)

- RI ranks #1 for “families with related children under 18 living in poverty” (2010).
- RI ranks #6 (last) for “children in households where household head holds at least a bachelor’s degree” (2010).
- RI ranks #1 for “children in single-parent families” (2010).
- RI ranks #1 for “children in households where household head is a high school dropout” (2010).

- RI ranks #1 for “children who speak another language, other than English, at home” (2010).
- RI ranks #6 (last) for “percentage of 3 and 4 year olds enrolled in pre-school programs” (2010).

**Graduation Rates**

The RI Department of Education calculates the high school graduation rate by using the number of students who graduate in four years or fewer divided by the total number of students who started the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort). We set out to determine the percentage of 4<sup>th</sup> graders who went on to graduate from high school, keeping in mind that we were unable to account for individual student transience. This became our *revised graduation rate*. However, because the Department of Education has not yet published all of the 2012 data, the raw data below tracks students who were 4<sup>th</sup> graders in 2003, 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2008, and high school graduates in 2011 (12, 13).

| <b><u>Community</u></b> | <b><u>4<sup>th</sup> grade 2003</u></b> | <b><u>9th grade 2008</u></b> | <b><u>Graduates 2011</u></b> | <b><u>Published Grad rate</u></b> | <b><u>Rev. grad rate</u></b> |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Providence              | 2336                                    | 2038                         | 1347                         | 66.1%                             | 57.6%                        |
| Pawtucket               | 842                                     | 639                          | 401                          | 62.8%                             | 47.6%                        |
| West Warwick            | 297                                     | 252                          | 190                          | 75.4%                             | 63.9%                        |
| Woonsocket              | 529                                     | 488                          | 308                          | 63.1%                             | 58.2%                        |
| Central Falls           | 320                                     | 246                          | 173                          | 70.3%                             | 54.0%                        |
| <b>Totals</b>           | <b>4324</b>                             | <b>3663</b>                  | <b>2419</b>                  | <b>66.0%</b>                      | <b>55.9%</b>                 |

Accordingly, without taking into account transience, 4.4 out of 10 fourth graders in the above-referenced communities did not graduate from high school (either at all, or in their 4<sup>th</sup> grade district). If they did not graduate at all, then the revised graduation estimates drop from 66% to 55.9%, which would represent a 15.3% decline in published graduation rates.

We then compared the number of 11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers in the 2009-2010 academic year (2,812 students) (14), to the number of graduates in 2011, from the same 5 communities (2,419

students), in an attempt to track attrition of students between 11<sup>th</sup> and 12 grades. In this case, 14% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (2009/2010) did not graduate in 2011.

We then conducted the same comparison on a statewide basis and found that 12% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the 2009/2010 school year did not graduate in 2011. With a published statewide graduation rate of 77% for 2011 (13), 11% of students apparently drop-out between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades, and the remainder (12%) drop-out after they take the test (October) in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **Math Proficiency**

When considering graduation rates, we found that a far greater percentage of students graduated from high school than were proficient in math, as defined by the results of the statewide NECAP exams. Therefore, a predominance of students that were not proficient in math by the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, ultimately graduated from high school anyway. For instance, in Providence, where over 17% of the entire CCRI population resides, only 11% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in math in 2010 (15), but 66% graduated from high school in 2011 (16). This means that fewer than 1 out of 5 Providence high school *graduates* were proficient in math by the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, the average 11<sup>th</sup> grade math proficiency NECAP score from the top 20 CCRI feeder communities was just 26%, while the average graduation rate in the same 20 communities was 76% (15, 16).

One of the interesting findings of the study was that there was a dramatic *decline* in math scores as students moved through the school systems. For instance, in Providence, where 11% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in math in 2011, only 28% of students were proficient in math in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades in 2004 and 2008, respectively (15).

Not a single school district among the top 20 CCRI feeder communities showed an increase in math scores from the 4<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. In fact, these communities showed an average

decline in math proficiency levels of 2% from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and an average decline in math proficiency of 46% from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Interestingly, Providence student math proficiency rates were flat from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and then dropped 61% from 8<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade (15).

In 2011, the statewide mathematics proficiency results (all communities) show an across-the-board drop among all ethnicities from middle school to high school, with a significant gap between the performance of white, black, and Hispanic students in all grades (elementary, middle and high school\*) (21).

| <u>Groups</u> | <u>Grade level</u> | <u>Total Students</u> | <u>% proficient/math</u> |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| White         | Elementary         | 20,083                | 72%                      |
| Black         | Elementary         | 2,710                 | 43%                      |
| Hispanic      | Elementary         | 7,559                 | 42%                      |
| White         | Middle             | 20,249                | 70%                      |
| Black         | Middle             | 2,300                 | 36%                      |
| Hispanic      | Middle             | 6,084                 | 36%                      |
| White         | High School*       | 7,213                 | 37%                      |
| Black         | High School*       | 868                   | 9%                       |
| Hispanic      | High School*       | 1,956                 | 11%                      |

\*11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers only.

A 2009 CCRI enrollment report titled “Who Are Our Students?” reported that 23.5% of the entire CCRI population consisted of minority students, with an additional 7.5% of students not reporting their race or ethnicity (7). The fall 2011 enrollment data showed that the minority head count had increased to 29.1%, representing a 24% increase in the percentage of minority students from 2009 to 2011 (20).

## Reading Proficiency

Statewide reading proficiency NECAP scores, among the top 20 CCRI feeder communities, tell a different story. Although there is growth in proficiency scores from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, a 21% increase on average, the baseline scores are still troubling, especially among the poorest communities. For instance, in Providence, only 56% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in reading based upon the 2011 NECAP test scores (17). Furthermore, in 2011, 22 Providence schools (elementary, middle, and high school) had a reading proficiency level below 50%. These schools ranged from 47.4% at Central High School, down to 29.8% at the Mary E. Fogarty Elementary School (23).

In Central Falls, only 41% of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were proficient in reading. In Woonsocket and Pawtucket, the reading proficiency rate in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade was 64% and 60%, respectively. However, many large CCRI feeder districts such as Cranston, Warwick, East Providence, Coventry, and North Providence have reading proficiency rates in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade between 78% (Cranston) and 84% (North Providence) (17).

Similar to the math proficiency scores, the 2011 statewide reading proficiency results (all communities) show a significant gap between the performance of white, black, and Hispanic students in all grades (elementary, middle, and high school\*) (22).

| <u>Groups</u> | <u>Grade level</u> | <u>Total students</u> | <u>% proficient/ reading</u> |
|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| White         | Elementary         | 20,070                | 79%                          |
| Black         | Elementary         | 2,697                 | 57%                          |
| Hispanic      | Elementary         | 7,413                 | 52%                          |
| White         | Middle             | 20,239                | 82%                          |
| Black         | Middle             | 2,278                 | 56%                          |
| Hispanic      | Middle             | 5,987                 | 54%                          |
| White         | High School*       | 7,195                 | 84%                          |
| Black         | High School*       | 875                   | 56%                          |
| Hispanic      | High School*       | 1,935                 | 58%                          |

\*11<sup>th</sup> grade NECAP test takers only.

## **A Discussion of Social Promotion**

It is clear from the data that the current approach to academic remediation has not worked. Statewide, students that have struggled with proficiency in one subject or another seem to have been promoted to the next grade level regardless of their academic proficiency, as measured by NECAP. Even taking into account potential measurement errors with the NECAP tests, how could this be otherwise when, for example, only 11% of Providence 11<sup>th</sup> grade students are proficient in math...and only 26% of students from the top 20 CCRI feeder communities are likewise proficient in math by the 11<sup>th</sup> grade? How did these students get to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade? Are we to believe that the NECAP math tests have a 74% error rate, or is it instead a chronic condition of non-performance that has followed our children from their earliest ages?

Promoting students based upon age, and not upon proficiency, creates a culture of failure that rewards mediocrity. How do we expect non-proficient students, who were unable to master the academic curriculum while in a particular grade, to learn new and more complex material while at the same time catching up on the academic areas that they have not yet mastered? If students are unable to do this while pursuing their elementary and secondary education, is it reasonable to expect non-proficient students to have success while pursuing a rigorous college curriculum at CCRI? It is important to stress that in Rhode Island, proficiency levels as measured by NECAP test scores, increase only moderately in reading and not at all in math from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> grades. We can therefore theorize that if a student is not at grade level by the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, he/she will most likely never be at grade level. It is commonly held that students must “learn to read” by the third grade if they hope to “read to learn” from the fourth grade on. If this is true, how can learning take place if we have large numbers of older students who are not proficient at reading?

How do we expect to truly improve proficiency when we may be giving 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, for example, a student who is at a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level, and then judging their effectiveness as teachers

based upon their ability to bring that student up three grade levels in one year? In any type of organizational behavior scenario, it is standard that people must know the following: (1) what is the game, (2) what are the rules and (3) how do I win. If the “game” is to improve proficiency levels, and the rules are based upon current student NECAP test scores, then the “how to win” is simple; we promote non performing students so that they become someone else’s problem, a war of attrition of sorts. Schools are in essence rewarded, in the form of higher test scores, when they pass non-proficient students on to the next grade, and another school. In some ways, it is similar to removing underperforming assets from the corporate balance sheet.

Furthermore, if a policy of social promotion is widely communicated to students, then there ceases to be reasonable consequences for non-performance on the students’ parts. The culture becomes one of, “if I fail, they pass me anyway”. However, this culture is not one that exists on the college level, and as such, students that fail their college classes do not advance, and may drop-out.

Since the RI Department of Education does not track social promotion, nor does it segment its NECAP testing data based upon specific *grade level* proficiency (NECAP performance classifications include proficient with distinction, proficient, partially proficient, substantially below proficient), we have no way of knowing whether a non-proficient 6<sup>th</sup> grade student is at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency level or a 2nd grade proficiency level. Therein lies the greatest problem. We have imperfect information and as such, we are unable to truly remediate these students effectively.

Is the answer requiring students to pass a test in order to graduate from high school, as is the forthcoming requirement? Perhaps this is a piece of the puzzle. However, “the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that 37 percent of U.S. fourth graders fail to achieve basic levels of reading achievement” (26). The report further states that early literacy skills are one of the most important predictors of later literacy achievement. If this is the case, the high school testing benchmark does nothing to remediate the problem; it simply punishes those who have wasted their



time for the past decade or so in our schools. Unless we refuse to attempt instruction at a *higher* grade level until proficiency is achieved at the *current* grade level, the problem with chronic low performance will persist.

In an effort to address the issue of non-proficiency, the RI Department of Education has instituted new Statewide Common Core Standards that were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators and education experts. “The standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate from high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”

(35) This is certainly a step in the right direction.

Research has shown that neither retention nor social promotion is a panacea. However, it is puzzling as to why no statewide data or statewide policy exists on social promotion when the topic has been hotly debated for years. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1998, in his State of the Union address, Bill Clinton said the following:

***“When we promote a child from grade to grade who hasn't mastered the work, we don't do that child any favors.***

***It is time to end social promotion in America's schools.***

***Last year in Chicago, they made that decision -- not to hold our children back, but to lift them up. Chicago stopped social promotion, and started mandatory summer school to help students who are behind to catch up.*** (24)

Unfortunately, the Chicago model has been unsuccessful, with an inordinate number of students being retained each year, and budget cutbacks which significantly altered the summer school programs (29).

In a study titled “The Balanced View: Social Promotion & Retention” (25), the authors suggest the following as alternatives to social promotion and retention:

- Multi-age classrooms - Instead of promoting students based upon their age, students are promoted based upon their proficiency in specific subject areas. In essence, a student could be in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math class, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade writing class and a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading class, only passing to the next *class level* when deemed proficient.
- Implement mandatory early intervention such as night school and Saturday school.
- Implement mandatory summer school for those who are not proficient in a specific subject area, regardless of whether they have received a passing grade for the class.
- Looping - having teachers stay with students for multiple years, creating close, sustained relationships among students and teachers.

Unfortunately, many chronically non-proficient students enter CCRI with the hope of earning a college degree, only to fail when they are unable to master college level work. In a fall 2010 survey of incoming CCRI freshmen, 92.4% stated that their goal was to earn a certificate or degree and/or transfer to another institution (34), yet less than a third will do so within three years.

According to the Kids Count 2009 Fact Book, “Two-thirds (67%) of Rhode Island seniors who graduated from high school in 2008 went directly on to a two-year or four-year college, compared with 63% nationally”. Rhode Island ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the nation and 3<sup>rd</sup> in New England (where first is best) in this category (27).

Therefore, with one of the highest statewide rates of high school graduates pursuing college, yet one of the lowest proficiency rates among states that administer the NECAP exams (RI ranks last for math proficiency and is tied for last in reading proficiency-2011) (28), it is not surprising that many RI students find college level work at CCRI overly challenging. Perhaps it should be required that students who wish to attend CCRI, must (1) prove that they have a high school degree, providing the college with a high school transcript (which would offer a second data point, in addition to the Accuplacer results, thereby giving a clearer picture of academic preparedness) or (2) demonstrate that they can meet

certain benchmarks for academic proficiency prior to being accepted into the college. If any potential CCRI candidates are deemed significantly non-proficient, perhaps there should be a path which has more of a GED curriculum that once mastered, would allow them admission into CCRI.

CCRI has been working to address the issue of academic non-proficiency by experimenting with various remediation strategies. For instance, the college pilot-tested a diagnostic Accuplacer instrument this summer which identifies specific skill deficiencies in areas such as math and reading. They also tested a highly controlled program called “The Learning Communities Project” that offered remediation to severely non-proficient students in the Center for Workforce and Community Education. The program, which ran for three semesters, focused on adult basic education and literacy services. Additional remediation initiatives at the college include “The Access to Opportunity” program, which is designed to bring students up to a pre-college skill level in one or more subject areas, an Accuplacer-Prep program, and more. CCRI will also be addressing remediation through its strategic planning process during the next year.

### **Final Thoughts**

The goal of this research project was to serve as a catalyst for dialogue on how best to help our students achieve their highest potential. We must continue to mine relevant data on our quest to improve student performance, while keeping in mind that, as with any successful organization, change and reinvention must permeate the culture for long term viability and competitiveness.

There are numerous business metaphors that parallel what we are currently experiencing within our education system in Rhode Island today: Typewriter manufacturers, the US Postal Service, and video rental stores, to name a few. The world changed, and they didn't. Instead, they were mired in the way things *used* to be, and not the way they are today.

The typewriter industry collapsed in the 1980's as personal computers became widely used for word processing, The US Postal Service has been marginalized because of overnight-delivery competitors and email, and Blockbuster Video has been replaced with Netflix and a variety of on-demand video options.

This dilemma can be best summed up by the words of Henry Ford: "I saw great businesses become but the ghost of a name because someone thought they could be managed just as they were always managed, and though the management may have been most excellent in its day, its excellence consisted in its alertness to its day, and not in the slavish following of its yesterdays. Life, as I see it, is not a location, but a journey. Even the man who most feels himself "settled" is not settled--he is probably sagging back. Everything is in flux, and was meant to be."(33)

The same can be said for the current state of our education system. There is no shortage of questions as we endeavor to improve the academic performance of our students, although many of the proposed answers are currently theoretical. The first step to solving a problem is recognizing that there is indeed a problem and as such, we attempted to present these problems in a straightforward and logical manner. This research project did not endeavor to assign blame, but instead to point out that there remains important work to be done on our journey toward improving the quality of education in Rhode Island. There will be successes and failures ahead, but that's how innovation works; each failure brings us one step closer to success.

The evolving culture among educators in the state of Rhode Island must continue to embrace change and innovation, no longer clinging to the outdated approaches to educating our youth that have delivered diminishing returns for decades. To that end, we must recognize those on the frontline of this important battle for our students' minds: our teachers. The challenges many of them face on a daily basis, and the obstacles some of them must overcome, are truly daunting. It is through their continued commitment to improving student proficiency that this problem will be mollified. Finally, we must commend the Commissioner of Higher Education, Ray Di Pasquale, and the Commissioner of the RI

Department of Education, Deborah Gist, who have both worked tirelessly as agents of change, creating a statewide dialogue focused on fixing the problem.

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